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Hollywood Movie Dialogue and the “Real Realism” of John Cassavetes

There's no such thing as a “good actor.” What it is, you know, is an extension of life. How you're capable of performing in your life, that's how you're capable of performing on the screen.

—John Cassavetes¹



Real life
is another
performance:
Gena Rowlands
as Myrtle in
Opening Night.



John Cassavetes

Movie Dialogue and Hollywood Realism

You're at a crowded party, sipping a drink. A man you don't recognize walks toward you and, to your surprise, addresses you by name. You might say, "I've forgotten your name." You might say, "Have we met?" or "How do you know my name?" But more than likely you would not say, "You have me at a disadvantage." No one would, no one real. And no man, I bet, has ever said to his wife, "Darling, what's gotten into you? You're not yourself." And if a husband ever did say something so awkward, I doubt his wife would ever reply, "Yes, I am . . . for the first time in my life." In a real conversation, these lines would sound cheap, bizarre, but we hear them a lot in movies, often in good ones, and not just old ones. Does anyone believe that when police show up at a bank heist, the criminals say coolly, "We got company"? And has a real police detective ever said to a reticent witness, "You and I are going downtown for a little chat"? At no point in my life has anyone used these words with me: "I hope so, Todd. I hope so." In fact, I hardly ever hear anyone use my name at all in conversation. It would sound peculiar, yet in movies it happens all the time, and it sounds perfectly natural. Movie dialogue obeys its own customs. We accept it according to the terms of the cinema, not of reality.

The virtue of stock lines, lines that frequently appear in Hollywood movie dialogue but not in real speech, is their efficiency. Stock movie lines have familiar, well-defined meanings, and they succinctly tell us what to expect and how to react. A stock line, for instance, might indicate a change in a character or a turn in a scene ("I can't *take* it any more!" or "You're not going anywhere," or "It's so crazy it just might work"). Some lines indicate triumph, the final pronouncement in a contentious exchange. We know a winning line when we hear it ("I *do* care . . . more than you know." "When you come back, I won't be here"), and we all recognize losing lines too ("I am *not* crazy! You *must* believe me!" "I can stop anytime I want"), lines given to characters who have gotten themselves into desperate trouble. Some lines indicate that a commotion or confrontation will soon erupt ("It's quiet. *Too* quiet." "You have *one* wish left"). Because they have a musical rhythm or suggest closure, some stock lines enable a scene to end with a feeling of finality, avoiding a dramatic thud ("He's bound to slip up sometime, and when he does . . . I'll be there." "I got a feeling this is gonna be a lonnnnng night"). Lines have genres, just as movies have genres, and generic lines offer us the same comfort that genre in general provides: they tell us where we are and where we are going.

Most dialogue in American movies abides by conventions (some of which it shares with stage dialogue), rules of conversation that predate talkies and persist to

the present day. I want to look briefly at five of them because they are so prominent and because they will help my discussion of the dialogue in John Cassavetes' movies. Not all movie dialogue follows these conventions, but they pervade most Hollywood cinema.

1. *Dialogue in American movies either advances the plot or supplies pertinent background information.* Any number of examples would demonstrate this point. Here's a brief exchange from *Stagecoach* in which Lt. Blanchard of the U.S. Cavalry speaks with stagecoach driver Curly:

BLANCH. Captain Sickle has asked if you will deliver this dispatch in Lordsburg the moment you arrive. The telegraph line's been cut.

CURLY Sure.

BLANCH. We're going with you as far as the noon station at Dry Fork. There'll be troop cavalry there and they'll take you on to Apache Wells. From Apache Wells you'll have another escort of soldiers into Lordsburg. But you must warn your passengers that they travel at their own risk.

CURLY At their own risk? Well, what's the trouble, Lieutenant?

BLANCH. Geronimo.²

Dense with information, this passage perfectly exemplifies movie dialogue's narrative efficiency. The audience quickly learns (or has reaffirmed) the three destinations of the stagecoach, the fact that the telegraph is not working, that the coach must meet more than one escort, that the ride is risky, and that Geronimo is the source of danger. Not only does all of Lt. Blanchard's information eventually work its way into the plot, but audiences naturally assume it will. Imagine how odd it would be if, for instance, Geronimo never appeared in the movie.

2. *American movie dialogue tends to move in a direct line, often toward one character's triumph and another's defeat.* Characters frequently win or lose a scene by means of what they say, and the lines of some characters are designed to make those characters look bad and other characters look good. Take the following exchange from *Citizen Kane* between Kane and his stodgy financial manager, Mr. Thatcher:

THATCH. Tell me, honestly, my boy, don't you think it's rather unwise to continue this philanthropic enterprise, this "Inquirer" that is costing you a million dollars a year?

KANE You're right, Mr. Thatcher. I did lose a million dollars last year. I expect to lose a million dollars this year. I expect to lose a million dollars next year. You know, Mr. Thatcher, at the rate of a million dollars a year, I'll have to close this place in—sixty years.

Even the carefully timed rhythms and repetitions in Kane's lines tell us he will win this exchange. And, though his lines are as confident as Kane's, Thatcher's starchy, smug tone exposes him, in accordance with the poetic justness of movie dialogue, to Kane's witty and winning reply.

3. *Characters in Hollywood movies communicate effectively through dialogue.* Conversations in movies tend to stay on subject, and, unlike real people, movie characters usually listen to one another and say what they mean. *Double Indemnity* contains an exchange that displays the kind of precisely tuned rapport we expect between lovers in Hollywood movies. Phyllis Dietrichson meets with insurance salesman Walter Neff to discuss life insurance for her husband. We know where such conversations lead and Walter seems to as well. Their flirtation closes with these lines:

PHYLLIS There's a speed limit in this state, Mr. Neff—forty-five miles an hour.

WALTER How fast was I going, officer?

PHYLLIS I'd say around ninety.

WALTER Suppose you get down off your motorcycle and give me a ticket?

PHYLLIS Suppose I let you off with a warning this time?

WALTER Suppose it doesn't take?

PHYLLIS Suppose I have to whack you over the knuckles?

WALTER Suppose I bust out crying and put my head on your shoulder?

PHYLLIS Suppose you try putting it on my husband's shoulder?

WALTER That tears it. Eight-thirty tomorrow evening then?

PHYLLIS That's what I suggested

WALTER Will you be here too?

PHYLLIS I guess so. I usually am.

WALTER Same chair, same perfume, same anklet?

PHYLLIS I wonder if I know what you mean?

WALTER I wonder if you wonder?



Double Indemnity:
Fred MacMurray and Barbara
Stanwyck in precisely attuned
rapport . . .

Phyllis and Walter communicate on many levels: They use the same tone (simultaneously seductive and antagonistic); there is a perfect exchange of sexually suggestive metaphors; they even replay each other's phrases and syntactic constructions. When the dialogue concludes with Walter's witty intimation, it seems as though their lines have been jointly working toward that moment all along.

4. *Whereas most real people adjust what they are saying as they speak, movie characters tend to speak flawlessly.* To offer examples of this convention would be an exercise in obviousness; I can better illustrate it through an instructive exception. David Mamet often scripts lines that mutate as they progress, and the fact that his dialogue often sounds so peculiar demonstrates the pervasiveness of the artificial norm. In the following line from *House of Games*, for instance, each of the last two phrases belongs to a syntax other than the one that leads into it: "You see, in my trade, this is called, what you did, you 'cracked-out-of-turn.'" The stammering syntax of many of Mamet's lines makes them similar to real speech, but, because they break a rule of movie dialogue, they sound awkward and mannered to those accustomed to conventional Hollywood dialogue.³

5. Of course one could find numerous film conversations that violate these rules; however, such exceptions themselves illuminate a fifth convention of American movie dialogue: *When a film breaks one of movie dialogue's rules, the transgression normally serves a direct narrative function.* If a conversation does not move in a clear direction, for instance, then the film typically invites the audience to notice the fact (consider the rambling conversation between George and Mary from *It's a Wonderful Life* in which a lack of direction reveals their nervousness and mutual attrac-

tion). Or, if two characters miscommunicate, the movie focuses on their inability to understand each other (take the scene in *Annie Hall* in which Alvy, trying to replicate the rapport he had with Annie, cooks lobster with his urbane date, a scene in which minor misunderstandings suggest that the speakers make a bad couple). Or if a character in a movie does not speak properly, then his verbal ineptitude might serve as a joke or quirk of character, or it may pose a problem he must overcome (Billy Bibbit's stutter in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*). To make this point another way, when a movie violates movie-dialogue convention, the violation means something.

These five conventions point to a curious paradox about Hollywood movie dialogue: such dialogue may strike us as realistic, but it is most unlike real speech. This contradiction becomes more intelligible, though no less curious, once we understand "realism" to be not the authentic representation of reality but rather a type of art that masks its own contrivance. Movies may be no more real than other kinds of art, but they tend to *feel* more real. For all the beatings Bazin has taken for his conception of cinema's fundamental realism, he is essentially correct when he says that in the cinema "there is nothing to prevent us from identifying ourselves in imagination with the moving world before us, which becomes *the world*."⁴ Hollywood movies in particular exploit film's powerful potential to engross us thoroughly in an alternate reality: They strive for an experience of total captivity, and they achieve it through a presentational style designed to draw audience members' attention away from the filmmaking process and keep them absorbed in the fiction.⁵ Hollywood films are, therefore, "realistic" in the way Bill Nichols defines the term when he writes, "in

fiction, realism serves to make a plausible world seem real. . . . Realism in fiction is a self-effacing style, one that deemphasizes the process of its construction.”⁶

Hollywood movie dialogue follows a similar design. Each of the conventions of movie dialogue tends to confine dialogue to the exigencies of the plot. Like the continuity system of editing, the conventions of Hollywood movie dialogue help maintain an unambiguous, efficient, purposeful, and uninterrupted flow of narrative information. Only rarely does movie dialogue cause us to feel disoriented or uncertain—feelings that are likely to make the dialogue itself the focus of our attention—and, when it does, the questions it raises pertain directly to the narrative (such as in a who-done-it or detective film). Sometimes, as in screwball comedy or film noir, we are asked to admire the witty banter of the script, but even in such movies, most of the dialogue invites us to pay attention not to the writing but to what the conversation has accomplished in the service of the plot. The effect of Hollywood movie dialogue’s simplicity and economy, its tendency to explain everything, and its insistence that nothing said be incidental to the narrative—its “excessive obviousness,” to paraphrase David Bordwell⁷—is that audiences tend to feel cozy when they hear it, un-anxious about going anywhere stylistically uncomfortable.

A real-life conversation will illustrate not only how unlike real speech movie dialogue really is but also how odd real dialogue would sound in a movie. The following real-life exchange comes from an article on conversation analysis, a branch of linguistic anthropology. Two teenagers, Bonnie and Jim, are talking on the telephone:

- BONNIE hhh ’n I was wondering if you’d let me borrow your gun.
- JIM My gun? . . . *What* gun?
- BONNIE Donchuh have a beebee gun? . . .
- JIM Yeah. aWhat I meant was *which* gun?
- BONNIE Tch! hh Oh uhm t hhh, well d’j’have a really long one? . . .
- JIM Why would you like a really long one?
- BONNIE Y’don’ have a really long one.
- JIM What?
- BONNIE Y’- Donchuh have a l- really long one?
- JIM Yeahhh A- all I wan’ to know why you want a gun.
- BONNIE Oh oh. OH . . . Because I’m I’m doi— heheh hhh I am doing a pl- a thing hhh in drama. It’s like kind of like you know what a pantomime is?

- JIM Uhh hhh! Yeah. I know. . . . Yuh gonna be doin’ it up on stage in front of the whole school?
- BONNIE No. no. no. . . . Jis’ in my drama class.
- JIM Yeah I know. . . . I mean in your class when it ha hh like you do it at lunch?
- BONNIE No uhm jis’ do it during drama period. . . . Uhm and so I’m doing it off a record called “Annie Get your *Gun*” and it’s called “Doin’ What Comes Natchurly” an she’s got a *gun*.
- JIM An you’re Annie hh.
- BONNIE Yeah.
- JIM Ehheheh hh. You a good uh actress?
- BONNIE No heheheh?
- JIM Th’n how d’ju come out to be Annie?
- BONNIE No- I’n- it’s jis’ that everybody in the class has to do a different pantomime, you know?⁸

Were it to appear in a movie, this conversation would be highly unconventional; indeed, it violates all of the rules of movie dialogue mentioned above. The first two rules state that movie dialogue “either advances the plot or supplies pertinent background information” and that it “tends to move in a direct line, often toward one character’s triumph and another’s defeat.” In a movie, an exchange that began “I was wondering if you’d let me borrow your gun” is likely to move in a dramatically different direction than it does here. This conversation has little direction at all (or drama). For instance, it slides from Bonnie’s need to borrow Jim’s gun to Jim’s surprise (based on a misunderstanding) that Bonnie obtained the lead in a class performance. Rule 3 says that “characters communicate effectively through dialogue.” Incidental miscommunications (such as Jim’s belief that Bonnie has a lead role), so rare in movie dialogue, frequently pepper real conversation. In fact, almost all of Jim and Bonnie’s statements either contain a misconception or are efforts to correct one. When Jim asks “What gun?”, for instance, Bonnie thinks the question is rhetorical and that, with it, Jim is telling her that he does not own a gun (she replies, “Donchuh have a beebee gun?”); however, he is simply asking her what gun she wants to borrow (“What I meant was which gun?”). The rest of the dialogue continues the series of minor misunderstandings and corrections. Rule 4 says that movie characters, in contrast to real people, “tend to speak flawlessly.” Bonnie and Jim’s conversation provides several examples of the way real people continuously modify, mid-sentence,

their meanings and syntaxes: “Y’ Donchuh have a l-really long one?” “It’s like kind of like you know what a pantomime is?” “I mean in your class when it ha hh like you do it at lunch?” Of course, none of the traits in the exchange “serves a direct narrative function” (rule 5) because, in the absence of an overriding plot, such traits are only incidental to the conversation.

My larger point about the passage is not as strictly demonstrable, but I think it is persuasive: The conversation between Bonnie and Jim is a real conversation, and yet, presented in a scripted form, it seems stranger than the dialogue cited from movies. Indeed, all the instances in which Bonnie and Jim’s exchange violates the conventions of movie dialogue—the awkward syntaxes, the minor misunderstandings, the rambling and incidental insertions—call so much attention to themselves (because we are not used to paying attention to them) that they make real speech sound artificial. The effect is common: Real life often seems alien when represented in art. Hollywood movie dialogue guards against such alienation precisely through its unreal form of realistic speech—speech which, though demonstrably contrived, gives off an air of reality.

Rambling, undefined, and filled with incidentals, the dialogue in the films of John Cassavetes more closely resembles the exchange between Bonnie and Jim than it does conventional movie dialogue, yet Cassavetes manages to avoid the affectedness that results when art represents reality too faithfully. He does so by employing a peculiar brand of realism, one that differs from the kind normally found in American movies.

Unlike most American filmmakers, Cassavetes does not always mask the art of his films, and thus he sometimes reminds his audiences that they are watching a movie. His goal, however, is not to point out the falsity of cinematic representations, as is the goal of such filmmakers as Robert Altman and Brian De Palma when they expose their films’ artifice. On the contrary, for Cassavetes, art is an extension of real life. By that I mean not merely that the plots and characters of Cassavetes’ films are plausible or that they mimic reality, but that a Cassavetes film itself often seems no different from a natural, real-life event and that one cannot always distinguish between a Cassavetes film *as* a film and the fictional events depicted in it. Hence his movies seem at once highly real and highly contrived.

Two films that exemplify Cassavetes’ aesthetic will help to explain and prove this paradoxical assertion. *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) illustrates Cassavetes’ talent for writing movie dialogue that blurs the distinction between actors and characters, calling attention to the actors as actors and hence to the film as

film. With regard to the larger question of realism in Cassavetes films, *Opening Night* (1978) demonstrates in a dramatic form that, in a Cassavetes movie, real life and art are the same thing.⁹

Cassavetes Dialogue

John Cassavetes’ dialogue comes so close to real speech that it often sounds peculiar, like ad-libbing. Many people think Cassavetes films are, in fact, ad-libbed, but they are not. His first film, *Shadows* (1959), closes with the caption, “The film you have just seen was an improvisation.” But even *Shadows* was not improvised in the way the word suggests. The actors did not make up their scenes as they went along. Cassavetes means that, developing the story in workshops, he and the actors never used a written script. However, they worked on those scenes for months before shooting them; they just never wrote down what they came up with. For all his later films, Cassavetes wrote complete scripts, and, although he and the actors changed the scripts in rehearsals, they rarely improvised on camera. Sometimes a crew member acted as a stenographer, taking down what Cassavetes and the actors made up in rehearsals so that they could reproduce it during filming. Gena Rowlands—Cassavetes’ wife, who acted in most of his films—said, “We do use improvisation, but not as widely as people think. We start with a very complete script. . . . Then [Cassavetes] will go and rewrite it—it’s not just straight improvisation. I’m asked a lot about this, and it’s true, when I look at the films and I *see* that they look improvised in a lot of different places where I know they weren’t.”¹⁰

Cassavetes seems to have sought the effect of improvisation without relying much on improvisation in the shooting process. Why would a filmmaker seek such an effect? My first answer—dialogue that sounds improvised sounds more like real speech—is perhaps too simple, but let us explore it in relation to a conversation from *A Woman Under the Influence*.

Nick’s Longhetti’s wife, Mabel, has had a mental breakdown, and he has committed her to an institution. The next day he inadvertently causes a coworker, Eddie, to fall down the side of a hill at their work site. Almost frenzied, Nick then takes his kids and another coworker, Vito, to the beach. The following exchange occurs as Vito and Nick walk along the beach with the kids:

VITO What a day, Nick. I haven’t been to the beach without my wife in—twelve years. I used to live in the water when I was a kid. Fish, they

called me. I was thin, see, lips all blue, shaking. I was always lookin' for girls. My kids, they're all grown up now. My brother, Marco, he's a college graduate, communist. Couldn't keep a job. Too many big ideas. Reads too much. I say, let the girls read. They love to read. You know what I mean?

NICK Okay, let's enjoy ourselves. Okay?

VITO Okay.

NICK I want to talk to my kids too.

VITO Talk to your kids? They never listen. Why should they listen? *I* never listened. Did *you* listen? I mean, did *you* listen?

NICK All right, right here. Come on, up here, we'll plop down right here. Come on. Come on. Come on.

VITO Hey Nick, I'm usually a lot of fun, right? But to see a guy like Eddie fall and break all his bones, holy shit, I mean what a fall.

NICK All right, knock it off, will you? We're here to have a good time. We're having a good time. We came to play with the kids. So let's play with the kids. Otherwise, we go home.

This conversation, which comprises almost the entire scene, follows the lines that appear in Cassavetes' original shooting script practically word for word.¹¹ However, it sounds improvised because, violating the normal conventions of movie dialogue, it is as inefficient and rambling as real speech.

Movie dialogue tends to move in a direct line. One of the qualities that makes this passage sound so authentic is that, like the passage between real teenagers Bonnie and Jim, this one slides from topic to topic without direction. Consider Vito's first monologue. His opening lines ("I used to live in the water when I was a kid.") suggest that he will tell Nick something about his childhood. The speech starts to ramble when Vito says, "My kids, they're all grown up now," which has the word "kid" in it and therefore sounds as though it might relate to the story he has begun, but the line ends up logically irrelevant to anything that precedes or follows. "My brother, Marco" echoes "my kids" of the previous sentence in a way that, again, sounds meaningful, but only at first. "He's a college graduate" leads naturally to "reads too much" which in turn leads to "let the girls read," echoing Vito's earlier statement that he was "always lookin' for girls." Although each sentence resonates with sentences that precede (words are repeated, ideas meld into one another), the lines do not add up to any coherent story. Lacking a clearly identifiable focus and progressing from association to association, the speech mimics the rambling quality of thought.

Whereas most real people adjust what they are saying as they speak, movie characters tend to speak flawlessly. The rambling quality in Cassavetes' dialogue is evident even at the sentence level. For instance, "But to see a guy like Eddie fall and break all his bones, holy shit, I mean what a fall" changes syntaxes mid-sentence, as though Vito were thinking of what he has to say as he says it, not simply before.

Gena Rowlands in
Woman Under the Influence



Characters in Hollywood movies communicate effectively through dialogue. The incoherence and lack of direction in Vito's story can be seen as well in the interactions between the two characters. Vito and Nick listen to each other just enough to continue conversation, repeating each other's words (for instance, when Nick says he wants to talk to his kids, Vito responds that kids don't listen), but clearly not communicating. While the exchange between, say, Walter Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson has a clearly identifiable tone, it is difficult to describe an overall tone for Nick and Vito's scene because each character sets his own tone: Vito sounds laid back and philosophical, whereas Nick seems hyperactive and uptight. It is as though Vito is in one kind of scene and Nick in another.

Movie dialogue advances the plot. The only portion of the exchange that relates to the film's plot is the discussion of Eddie's fall, but it is buried among lines to which the scene gives equal weight. Besides, this scene is the last we hear of the injury, which becomes, finally, a narrative dead end.

When a film breaks one of movie dialogue's rules, the transgression normally serves a direct narrative function. The most peculiar thing about this passage is that none of the violations of dialogue convention has an evident purpose in the movie. The scene is not even about Nick and Vito's inability to communicate; their miscommunications have little to do with the plot of the film and are, in any case, too subtle to give the scene focus.

The exchange thus lacks the chief quality that distinguishes movie dialogue from real speech: a sense that someone wrote the lines with a clear dramatic intention. The five conventions I have discussed point to a *design* behind Hollywood movie dialogue, and Cassavetes dialogue, by violating them, lacks this sense of an implied scriptwriter. Like the exchange between Bonnie and Jim, Nick and Vito's scene seems to have no creative hand controlling the characters, encouraging us to focus our attention, directing the dialogue toward a defined conclusion, and giving the scene meaning. Because it feels unanchored by an overt authorial intention, *A Woman Under the Influence* seems as though it could go just about anywhere, as though Cassavetes' actors might say anything that occurs to them.

I am uncomfortable with what I have said about this passage because I just finished arguing that dialogue that mimics real speech is not realistic, yet this dialogue, though unconventional, has an air of reality. So why doesn't Cassavetes' effort to mimic the haphazardness of real conversation seem like the ultimate

contrivance? To answer that question, we need to think more about the effect of improvisation.

Conspicuous improvisation tends to call attention to the artistic process because it encourages audiences to notice not just the behavior of the characters but also that of the actors playing them. But improvisation is not solely the activity of professional performers; when real people speak, most of the time they are improvising. Hence actors who appear to be improvising also appear to behave more like real people. Indeed, Cassavetes films not only seem improvised, but they frequently concern characters who themselves seem to be improvising, and one cannot easily distinguish one kind of improvisation from the other. We can see here the germ of an alternative form of realism to the kind one normally finds in American movies, a realism created not by concealing one's art but by revealing the similarity between the act of creating art and the act of living.¹²

In capturing the artistic quality of real life, Cassavetes films exploit the resonances between the systems of representation within both drama and reality. Though I have only indirect statements to support the contention (such as the quotation that opens this essay), I suspect that Cassavetes saw real life as a kind of performance, that in his films he sought to represent people in the act of representing themselves, and that he intended us to blend actorial behavior with the behavior of the characters his actors impersonate. But whether or not he intended the effect, the feeling of actorial improvisation, when coupled with characters who seem to make up their statements as they go along, serves to combine actor and role (and hence art and reality) far more thoroughly than with more conventional, tightly constructed dialogue.

In the following brief speech, Mama Longhetti, Nick's mother, is speaking to a group of people Nick has invited to the house in honor of Mabel's return from the mental hospital. Angered by her son's stupidity in having such a party, she makes the following announcement to the guests:

Everybody please. Quiet in here, please. Now you know Nicky loves you all. *I* love you all. Now you should know better to come here on a day like this when Mabel's coming out of the hospital. I'm not blaming you, but I'm saying the girl'll be here any minute, and you must go home, immediately! Please.

Mama says a number of inconsistent things in this quick speech. She thinks, understandably, that people might feel offended when she kicks them out of the house, so

she prefaces her remarks with “Now you know Nicky loves you all.” Right after she says the line, however, she seems to realize that it implies that only Nick—and not she—loves the guests. So she adds another line, “I love you all.” But Mama also wants to register her disapproval of the party: “Now you should know better to come here on a day like this when Mabel’s coming out of the hospital.” Just as she does, however, she acknowledges that it is not the fault of the guests that they were invited to the party, adding, “I’m not blaming you.” Again she has compensated for what she has already said, even though she has indeed just blamed them for coming to the party. (A missing word—“you should know better [*than*] to come here”—furthermore makes logical mush out of her meaning.) Similarly, she compensates for the aggressiveness implicit in the line, “. . . you must go home, immediately!” with the more modest “please.” Mama continually says things that do not sound right to her, and she makes up for it by trying to alter the implication of what she just said. The result is an impression of improvisation—making it up as she goes along. It is important to note, however, that the same point could be made about Katherine Cassavetes, the actor playing Mama Longhetti, since such extemporaneous adjustments are as indicative of actorial improvisation as they are of real speech. Cassavetes’ dialogue tends to focus on precisely those moments when the two forms of improvisation become impossible to delineate.

Another example: Earlier in the picture, after Nick has stood her up, Mabel spends the night with a stranger, Garson Cross. In the morning, upset and behaving irrationally, Mabel goes into the bathroom, and Garson yells at her through the bathroom door:

I’m gonna have to leave in a minute now. Listen, if this Nick fellow’s on your mind and you consider me some kind of a threat to him, or if you’re trying to punish him with me or me with him, forget it! I never met the man! And don’t blame yourself for me if that’s what you’re doing.

As in Mama Longhetti’s speech, the tone and substance of this speech—which, incidentally, follows the shooting script verbatim—transform as it progresses. When Garson says, “Listen, if this Nick fellow’s on your mind and you consider me some kind of threat to him,” he seems about to say something like “then don’t worry about me; I’ll leave and never bother you again.” But the first part of his sentence fails to predict where his sentence in fact goes. Suddenly, Garson chastises Mabel for what he fears she might be contemplating: “or if

you’re trying to punish him with me or me with him, forget it!” The “forget it” and “I never met the man” follow logically from the second part of the sentence but do not make sense with the sentence’s original clause. Garson has changed his mind mid-sentence about what he wants to say to Mabel. “And don’t blame yourself for me if that’s what you’re doing” is another adjustment, making sure now that Mabel does not feel guilty. Garson adds to his sentences until they say everything he wants them to say, even if what he finally says clashes with what he said when he started speaking.

It would not have mattered whether these two speeches had been scripted or not; they certainly *feel* improvised. Moreover, one cannot know whether to attribute the feeling to the behavior of the actors or to that of the characters. One can see now why an air of actorial improvisation was so attractive to Cassavetes: it accomplishes the very blending of art and reality that he sought to achieve.

Opening Night and Real Realism

The confusion of actor and role in Cassavetes’ movies occurs not solely because, as improvisers, his actors appear to behave like regular people; such confusion results also from Cassavetes’ interest in the theatrical nature of real life. Cassavetes movies often focus, for instance, on people who play roles, make scenes, people who try to direct, write or, most commonly, improvise a script. Consider Mabel’s efforts to perform the role of wife that Nick wants her to play (“Tell me how you want me to be. I can be that. I can be anything”), or six-year-old Phil in Cassavetes’ *Gloria* (1980), posturing and talking like a Hollywood gangster (“He don’t know the score. He sees a dame like you and a guy like me. He don’t know”), or the stage shows in *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976/1978), or, near the end of the film, Cosmo’s “performance” for his performers, who have no idea he is shot and bleeding to death. But nowhere is the theatrical quality of real life more evident than in *Opening Night*, a movie about people who act, direct, and write dramatic fiction for a living.

Better than any other film, *Opening Night* defines Cassavetes’ aesthetic, which could be summarized thus: *Don’t bother about the distinctions between reality and fiction, between actor and role, or between script and improvisation; none of those categories holds up. Opening Night* not only dramatizes the disintegration of those categories, but it also prevents its audience from maintaining them. More than any other Cassavetes movie,



Zohra Lampert
and Gena Rowlands
in *Opening Night*

Opening Night makes real life and art seem like the same thing.

The film stages the similarity between two realities contained in all fiction: the reality of the fiction (Phyllis Dietrichson, say, wants to kill her husband; she enlists the help of insurance salesman Walter Neff, etc.) and the *real* reality, the reality that the fiction is just a fiction (Phyllis is played by an actor, Barbara Stanwyk, in the film *Double Indemnity*, etc.). *Opening Night* in fact contains three realities, since those two realities are themselves depicted in the film. The plot concerns a group of theater professionals working on a play, and—as is often the case in movies about the theater (e.g., *A Double Life*, *Kiss Me Kate*, *Mephisto*, *The Dresser*)—several particulars from the film and the play mirror one another. For example, both *Opening Night* and the play the movie frames, *The Second Woman*, deal with aging, love, and violence. Myrtle Gordon, a fictional stage actress (played by Gena Rowlands), has difficulty with the violence she encounters both off-stage and on, and both Myrtle and her character in the play, Virginia, have trouble coming to terms with getting older. The title of the play refers to the “second woman” that emerges in Virginia as she ages. Within the framing fiction, however, that title also recalls the fan, Nancy, whom Myrtle sees killed in a car crash and who literally haunts Myrtle throughout the movie. Specific scenes from the movie and the play echo each other. For instance, shortly after Myrtle visits Nancy’s family during a funeral ceremony at the family’s apartment, Virginia, on stage, visits her ex-husband Maurice and his family at their apartment. Both visits are unexpected and unwelcome, and in each scene the families admonish Myrtle/Virginia for coming. In another scene from the movie, Maurice (played by Cassavetes)

says to Myrtle, “You’re not a woman to me anymore.” A little later during rehearsals, Marty (the character Maurice performs in the play) says to Virginia, “You don’t get to me.” The lines are similarly phrased, and both declare her lack of power over him. The movie supplies dozens of other themes, lines, scenes, and characters that appear both in one reality (the story of *Opening Night*) and the other (that of *The Second Woman*).

The similarity between the realities depicted in the film—and this effect is also typical for movies about plays, as well as for movies about movies—establishes a special kind of connection between the film and its real-life audience. Films about plays in a sense “reach out” to their audiences because of the resonance between, on the one hand, the play’s relation to the film and, on the other, the film’s relation to the real world (the world in which we are audience members sitting in a theater watching a movie). In the language of an SAT analogy, *Opening Night* is to *The Second Woman* as the real world is to *Opening Night*. The movie and the play, for instance, are both fictional dramas, both performed by the same real-life actors, and we, the moviegoing audience, are like the fictional theatergoers depicted in the film. Cassavetes and Rowlands are, famously, husband and wife in real life; they play former lovers in the movie; and in the play they play lovers who seem about to break up.

Cassavetes exploits the complex relations among these three realities (the reality of the play, the movie, and the real world) by frequently confusing them in our minds. Audiences, for instance, often cannot tell the play from the movie. Most of the examples of this confusion are so brief and, taken individually, so incidental that they might seem hardly worth mentioning, but together they comprise a continuous flow of

analogous ambiguities. For instance, when Myrtle makes one of her stage entrances as Virginia, for a moment the movie deludes us into thinking she has broken character. The screen shows a close-up of Myrtle's face as she enters the stage and the theatergoers clap for her. She appears to turn to the audience, smile, and nod, acknowledging their applause. A second later—after the camera cuts to a shot of another character, Lena—we realize that Myrtle did not nod to the theatergoers, but to her. Myrtle had not broken character at all; it just looked to us as though she had. During another performance of the play, Lena says to Virginia sternly, “What kind of woman are you?” Myrtle looks so shaken by the question that we must wonder whether we are watching the face of the actor or of the character she portrays. On opening night in New York, when Myrtle looks too drunk to perform, she appears to turn to the audience mid-scene and say, “I'm sorry. I'm sorry.” Is she stopping the play? The placement of the camera behind Myrtle, who appears to be looking out at the audience, encourages us to think so. As the performance continues, however, we soon feel confident that Myrtle, in character, had in fact apologized to the other characters in the scene.

Confusion about whether the actors are in character or not persists throughout the movie and makes watching *Opening Night* an uneasy experience, an uneasiness the film inherits from live theater. Normally, filmgoers need not worry about live errors (such as a faulty prop or a missed cue), whereas, at a play, something can go wrong at any minute and disrupt the drama's fine balance between fiction and real life. *Opening Night* incorporates that danger, even heightening it by establishing Myrtle as a volatile actor, one who has difficulty with particular scenes and who defiantly breaks character when upset, and we frequently have trouble distinguishing between the play and Myrtle's own unscripted outbursts.

Our questions arise not only when we watch the characters on stage: we experience similar confusions watching them in their “real” lives, since they often appear to be acting even in the absence of a theater audience. At times Maurice seems more affected off-stage than on, humoring Myrtle, smiling at her when we know he can't stand her. Manny Victor is the director of the play, but he seems more like an actor in life. He tells Myrtle on the phone, “There is no one I love more than you at this moment.” He then covers the receiver, turns to his wife, Dorothy (Zorah Lampert), who is sitting in the room with him, and says, “You know I love you.” Which is the act, what he says to Myrtle or what he says to his wife, or both? The playwright, Sarah Goode (Joan

Blondell), performs and dissembles as frequently as the other characters. She hates Myrtle for sabotaging her play, and at one point both we and Myrtle overhear Sarah say, “that little bitch.” Sarah then immediately turns to Myrtle, who has arrived unexpectedly, and, in a voice that sounds as phony as her curse sounded sincere, says, “There you are. Now, don't be worried. Promise? Don't be nervous. I'll call you.” Acting emerges as a condition of life, not simply the activity of performers on stage.¹³

The ghost story within *Opening Night* engenders similar confusions of fiction and reality, causing us to ask whether the ghost is real or Myrtle's fantasy. For instance, when Myrtle visits Melva Drake, a spiritualist, for a seance, the movie tricks us into thinking that the spiritualist might see the dead girl. We see all three women—Myrtle, Melva, and Nancy—in the room together, an amazed look on Melva's face. After a long, violent fight between Nancy and Myrtle, we finally realize that Myrtle alone saw her, and our question remains unanswered, as it does for the remainder of the film.

One scene most tellingly illustrates the ways in which the film connects all these confusions of realities—play vs. movie, movie vs. real world, real self vs. role, ghost vs. fantasy. After a fight with Manny, Myrtle runs into her hotel bathroom and we see her washing her face at the sink. Not until the camera pans do we realize that the figure at the sink was not Myrtle but Nancy, who has appeared unexpectedly. Nancy then says to Myrtle: “I like the music. It's a nice, soothing sound.” As she speaks, jazz music is in fact playing on the sound track, but audiences have no way of knowing whether Nancy has said these lines in response to the music she hears in the bathroom or whether the music is the film's non-diegetic representation of Nancy's words. Moreover, her statement might have nothing to do with that music, which might simply be the film's score, placed in the scene to create mood and thematically unrelated to Nancy's line. In what reality does that music exist? The music fades just before Manny walks into the bathroom, and we see the two women from his perspective as they both look up at him. The shot encourages us to ask, “Is the ghost real? Does he see Nancy too?” and, for a moment, the movie leaves such questions unanswered. Myrtle says, “If only I could rid myself of you,” a line she could be directing toward either Manny or the ghost. Manny appears similarly confused: “What the hell are you doing? Are you going over your lines?” Just as we cannot tell whether Myrtle is speaking to Manny or to her fantasy, Manny cannot tell whether Myrtle is in the real world

or the world of the play. Myrtle then says, “If I could rid myself of the thought of being your wife.” The statement clarifies that Myrtle is not addressing the ghost; however, it raises a new ambiguity: Because the line fits within the story of *The Second Woman*—in which Virginia, unable to move beyond her past, visits her ex-husband—Myrtle might in fact be rehearsing her lines (or pretending to), just as Manny guesses. Manny’s disgusted expression clarifies that she is speaking to him. The clarification, however, raises other questions: Why does Myrtle think of herself as Manny’s wife? Were they previously married, or does Myrtle feel wedded to Manny in her imagination? Almost every line, every sound, and every shot in this brief scene either clears up an ambiguity or creates a new one—many do both—linking several similarly unresolved questions about ghosts, fantasies, realities, performance, and identity.¹⁴

I argued earlier that, in a Cassavetes film, art and reality are so thoroughly blended as to be, at times, indistinguishable. *Opening Night* not only gives audiences the accustomed experience of a Cassavetes film, it takes that experience as its subject. Indeed, the questions we ask about the performances of *The Second Woman*, the questions we ask about the characters in *Opening Night*, and the questions those characters ask about one another are the same questions people generally ask about Cassavetes movies: Who is controlling what happens? Are the actors improvising or following a script? When are they acting and when playing themselves? All Cassavetes movies offer instances of what this movie is about: the impossibility of differentiating art from real life.

Indeed, one of the astonishing things about *Opening Night* is that it depicts people who behave a lot like people watching a Cassavetes movie: audience’s responses to the characters often mirror precisely those characters’ responses to themselves and to one another. Take, for instance, Myrtle, who has the most difficult time of anyone maintaining a clear grasp on reality and even on her own identity. “I somehow seem to have lost the, uh, the reality of, of, of the uh—the reality,” she says in rehearsals. “I’m not myself.” In an apparent effort to compensate for her confusion, she vigorously asserts the distinction between fantasy and real life. She says, for instance, that she is too different from Virginia to perform the part successfully (“She’s very alien to me”); however, it is clear to us and to some of the characters that, on the contrary, she identifies too strongly with Virginia. The cruelty of the play, the play’s lack of hope, and Virginia’s aging make it difficult for Myrtle to separate her identity from that of her character, who has to deal with problems Myrtle dodges and denies in her own life. During more than one performance of the play, Myrtle steps out of the fictional reality and into the real one in a seemingly desperate effort to keep those realities straight in her mind. For instance, when Marty (the stage character played by Maurice) slaps Virginia (played by Myrtle), Myrtle collapses, stands up and says to him: “Don’t be afraid. I love you. You’re a wonderful actor, Maurice. We must never forget this is only a play.” Calling attention to the play’s contrivance, the line both asserts the distinction between fiction and reality and admits Myrtle’s difficulty doing so.



Acting emerges as a condition of life, not simply the activity of performers on stage. Ben Gazzara (left) with Rowlands and Cassavetes.

Maurice's slap provides several other examples of the way characters in the movie, like the movie's audience, struggle to distinguish reality from fantasy. We first hear of Myrtle's objections to the slap when Manny talks to her about it on the phone: "There's nothing humiliating about it. Well, you're on the stage for chris-sake. I mean, he's not slapping you for real." It remains unclear whether Myrtle finds the slap humiliating to her, the actress, Myrtle Gordon, or to her, the character, Virginia, but in either case she cannot distinguish a stage slap from a slap "for real." In rehearsals, she cannot even make it through the scene. When Maurice just gestures to hit her, she falls to the stage floor. David, the play's producer, thinks Myrtle is acting. He claps and yells "Bravo," as Myrtle screams, "No more!" But Myrtle really is distraught, a fact that slowly dawns on him.

When Maurice slaps Myrtle during a real performance, she again falls, and the theatergoers, like David, do not realize that her collapse has no proper place in the drama. Improvising, Maurice says, "Virginia, I didn't hit you that hard." Clearly he is speaking to Myrtle, but he addresses the line to Virginia: Maurice plays the same trick on the playgoing audience that the movie periodically plays on us, making them believe that he and Myrtle are in character when in fact they are out. Over and over, the film portrays characters who, like its audience, work vigilantly but unsuccessfully to maintain a firm grasp on reality, on fiction, and on the difference between the two.¹⁵

The end of the movie substantiates my thesis that *Opening Night* defines Cassavetes' aesthetic philosophy and that at the heart of that philosophy is a concept we might call "real realism"—the notion that art can be both highly real and highly contrived.

The ending sends a message—don't worry about the differences between reality and fiction, or script and improvisation—that belies the very unsettling experiences the film has worked so hard to give us. Indeed, if one did not care whether Myrtle's ghost is real or fantasy or which parts of the play were accidental and which parts intentional, and if one did not question whether Cassavetes' actors were improvising or following a script, or whether they were acting or just "playing themselves," then *Opening Night* would require little work at all. Of course, we do care about such distinctions and Cassavetes knows it. However, *Opening Night* demonstrates a way of thinking about art in which "art" disappears as a category separate from real life. In the film's climactic scene, Myrtle and Maurice harmoniously combine reality and fiction through an act of improvisation.

As I have said, when actors improvise, they behave like people in real life. But an improvisation itself is a fantasy, since the actors are still pretending to be people other than themselves. Improvisation combines reality and fiction in an uncontrolled mixture of the actors' own identities and the identities of the roles they perform. It is a lot like life, at least as Cassavetes likes to depict it.

As we watch Myrtle and Maurice in the play's New York opening, we gradually get the sense that they have left the script and are making up their performance as they go along. The moment is tense at first because we are not sure what will happen to Sarah's play and because Maurice and Myrtle, performing on stage, seem to be in the middle of a real fight. Already realities have been blended, but Cassavetes never misses an opportunity to blend them further. Just as moviegoers see their experience represented on the screen, just as the characters in the movie act in a play that mimics their own lives, and just as the drama, *Opening Night*, is about the making of a drama, Maurice and Myrtle's performance—which calls conspicuous attention to the actors as actors—at times concerns performance itself and the very predicament in which they find themselves as actors:

MAURICE I am restless—ha ha ha ha—with this pose.

MYRTLE Well, I am not me.

MAURICE And I know that I am someone else!

MYRTLE Do you think I am too?

MAURICE Yes.

MYRTLE Okay, it's definite then. We've been invaded. There's someone posing here as us.

As Maurice and Myrtle joke about posing and being other than themselves, their exchange comments on the questions of identity and reality that reverberate throughout the movie. For instance, the lines call attention to the mixing of realities that occurs in dramatic fiction, in which one person pretends to be another ("Well, I am not me." "And I know that I am someone else!").

After a lot of bickering, the scene on stage ends with a sort of comic foot-shake between the two characters/actors, and all the performers, now beaming, come out for bows. The scene is an emblem for the entire movie (and hence for Cassavetes movies in general). Here we find real realism depicted in almost textbook form: acting that announces itself as acting and that also works through real situations. The moment not only brings together the play's characters, Virginia and Marty, but also the actors playing them,

Maurice and Myrtle. It concludes the play for the fictional theatergoers in the audience, as well as providing a conclusion for us, the film's audience. Indeed the scene blends the realities of the film so harmoniously that I doubt the distinctions between them still matter to us.

But the most remarkable thing about this performance is that, whereas the trial performances in New Haven flopped, this one succeeds. The audience, laughing and clapping thunderously for the actors, appears to love it. (Incidentally, the "fictional" audience in the theater was, in fact, a real one. Cassavetes advertised in the newspaper for people who would dress up and watch some actors perform scenes from a play. He did not tell audience members when to laugh or applaud because he wanted spontaneous reactions.) Myrtle seems to have started the impromptu for pure spite ("I'm gonna bury that bastard," she says before going on stage), but, unlike earlier scenes in which Maurice fought Myrtle's attempts to stray from the play as written, here he plays along with her on-stage improvisations. Dorothy sits in the audience with a look of amazed delight. Even Manny, who has always grown furious whenever Myrtle has diverged from the script, looks as though he is beginning to enjoy the "play." The film concludes with a triumphant party backstage as members of the audience congratulate the performers. In the end, *Opening Night* encourages us to do what Maurice and the theatergoers do, what Dorothy does, and what Manny learns to do as he sits back and enjoys the show: accept that art, like life, is spontaneous and uncontrolled. One may consider the end of this movie Cassavetes' advice to us, his audience, whom he persistently prevents from making the kinds of distinctions that our experience with art has accustomed us to making. In a Cassavetes film, fiction can be as real as reality and real life is another performance.

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Notes

1. Grover Lewis, *Academy All the Way* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1974), 115.
2. Quotations from movies are my transcriptions, unless designated otherwise.
3. Other lines from *House of Games* with shifting syntaxes include, "Man, you're living in the dream, your questions,

'cause there is a real world," and "You threatened to kill a friend of mine. . . . Whether you mean it or not, and it's irrelevant to me, because you aren't going to do it." All three lines are spoken as Mamet wrote them in his shooting script. Cf. David Mamet, *House of Games: The Complete Screenplay* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1985), 67, 10, and 13.

4. André Bazin, "Theater and Cinema—Part Two," *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 102.
5. Numerous scholars have described Hollywood's "invisible style." For a brief and lucid discussion, see David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 162–64.
6. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 165. Investigating the history of the term "realism" inevitably leads one to a paradox: On the one hand, realism signifies the portrayal of reality as it really is (see the writings of Sergei Eisenstein, Cesare Zavattini, and John Grierson). But, on the other, realism is a form of representation that masks reality in order to give us the *illusion* of reality (Nichols, Raymond Williams, Richard Maltby): We register something as real because the apparatus for representing it has been hidden from us—realism is a form of deceit. Cassavetes situates himself between these two notions of realism, producing art that is both like life as well as contrived.
7. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 3–11.
8. Emanuel A. Schegloff, "On the Organization of Sequences as a Source of 'Coherence' in Talk-in-Interaction," *Conversational Organization and Its Development*, ed. Bruce Dorval (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1990), 56–58. In addition to shortening the quotation for convenience, I have altered it some since it appears originally in a technical transcription notation.
9. When I say "Cassavetes films," I am referring to the ones over which he had complete control, not the films he made early in his career for the studios—*Too Late Blues* (1962) and *A Child Is Waiting* (1963)—nor *Big Trouble* (1986), which he directed simply for the money. *Gloria* (1980) falls somewhere between a Cassavetes film and the other type. "I wrote the story to sell, strictly to sell," Cassavetes said in an interview. "It was no great shakes" (James Stevenson, "John Cassavetes—Film's Bad Boy," *American Film* 5 [January/February, 1980], 48). But Columbia wouldn't buy the script unless he also agreed to direct it, which he did, after reworking the script and turning the film into something he was willing to have his name on.
10. Judith Crist, *Take 22: Moviemakers and Moviemaking* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1984), 256.
11. The exchange in the script reads as follows:
 VITO What a day. Haven't been to the beach without my wife in twenty-three years. I used to live in the water when I was a kid. Fish, they used to call me. I was skinny, see, lips all blue, shaking, looking for girls. . . . Yeah, my kids are grown now. My son, Marco, is a college graduate. Communist. Couldn't make a living. Too many ideas. Too much reading. I say, let the girls read, they love reading.

NICK Okay let's enjoy ourselves, okay? I want to talk to my kids too.

VITO Kids—they don't listen. Why should they listen? I never listened.

NICK Tony, this is good right here. Let's just plop right here.

VITO I'm usually a lot of fun, Nick—right? But to see a guy like that fall and break all his bones—holy shit, what a fall.

NICK All right, knock it off, will you? We're here, we're having a good time, we're gonna play with the kids—that's what you came here for. Otherwise, go home.

John Cassavetes, *A Woman Under the Influence*, screenplay (Faces Music, 1972), 89–90.

12. This notion of realism differs from conventional ones, although we can see it as a logical outgrowth of more traditional conceptions. In one of his definitions of realism, Raymond Williams writes: "Realist art or literature is seen as simply one convention among others, a set of formal representations, in a particular medium to which we have become accustomed" (*Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1976], 219–220). According to this definition, realism is merely a system of representational conventions so familiar that we no longer recognize them as conventions. Though it seems to reflect reality more authentically, realistic art—because it is, finally, merely a representation—in fact comes no closer to reality than other systems of representation. Richard Maltby agrees: "The goal of realism is an illusion. Art cannot 'show things as they really are,' because the 'real' in realism is defined as being that which is unmediated by representation. Since it is outside representation, it cannot be represented: representations can be only more or less inadequate imitations or substitutions for it" (*Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* [Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995], 150). Yet once we put as much pressure on the concept of realism as do Williams and Maltby, we are inevitably led to the conclusion that reality itself is not "real" but merely "realistic," since reality is also mediated through representations, performances, scripts and conventions, as well as through our own perceptions, misapprehensions and ideologies.
13. Ray Carney makes essentially this point when he says that the movie complicates "our awareness of both 'reality' and 'acting' so that the terms lose their separateness from each other. . . . There is no alternative pastoral self underneath all these masks, roles, and postures" (*American Dreaming: The Films of John Cassavetes and the American Experience* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985], 250). Carney also writes, "The characters who interest Cassavetes exist only by virtue of their performative capacities, their abilities to play with, and against, the audiences around them" (251). My argument about *Opening Night* adds to and diverges from Carney's in two principle ways. First, Carney does not recognize the special resonance between the experience of Cassavetes movies in general and the subject of *Opening Night* in particular. Second, though Carney acknowledges the ways in which people in Cassavetes movies behave like actors (everyday role-playing as the "art" in real life), he does not see the relation between that notion and the notion that improvisation causes actors to

behave like regular people (improvisation as the "real" in art). Together these two elements (and the blurring of them) comprise the experience those of us who watch Cassavetes movies expect from them, and together they create the films' powerfully realistic effect.

14. The film's most heavy-handed instance of the paradoxical blending of realities occurs at the New York opening of *The Second Woman*, when some new actors appear in the movie as theater audience members. First, we see Peter Falk, the most famous of Cassavetes' troupe, standing in the theater lobby. The movie does not name him, but it seems as though Falk has come to see the play of his friend and colleague, John Cassavetes. That notion, however, violates the boundaries of the fictional reality. After the play, Tony Roberts and Seymour Cassel appear and the same paradox arises. Later still, Manny (played by Gazzara) introduces his wife Dorothy (played by Lampert) to director Peter Bogdanovich (played by Peter Bogdanovich), whom Manny introduces by name.
15. It would appear that Cassavetes maintained the same kind of ambiguity on the set that he generated for his audiences and his characters. Joan Blondell said about making *Opening Night*, "I couldn't tell when the actors were having a private conversation and when they were actually changing the lines of the script" (Janet Maslin, "From John Cassavetes, *Tempest* in the Theater," *New York Times*, 1 October, 1988, L15).



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